

Participant Handouts

Conflict Resolution Part 2: The Assembly's Role in Managing Conflict

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Overview for Participants

Conflict Resolution Part 2: The Assembly's Role in Managing Conflict

Purpose

- ★ To examine the dynamics and stages of conflict
- ★ To explore the roles and options open to Assemblies managing conflict and dealing with disruptive individuals

This workshop builds on material covered in “Conflict Resolution Part 1: Conflict and the Individual.” It examines the dynamics and stages of conflict and also explores the roles and options open to Assemblies managing conflict and dealing with disruptive individuals. The workshop contains opportunities to apply principles to specific conflict situations.

What you will find inside your handouts:

- ★ Quotations and worksheets for the various segments of the workshop
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by individual participants
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by Assemblies within two months after a workshop

If you would like to have information on additional modules or other Assembly development resources, ask your Assembly Development representative or contact the Office of Assembly Development at (847) 733-3490, by mail at 1233 Central Street, Evanston, IL 60201, or by e-mail at OAD@usbnc.org.

Note: If time is short for any exercise, focus on the quotations in **Bold**

The Call to a New State of Mind

“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them. . . .”

“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá’í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá’u’lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message to the Bahá’ís of the world, 1996.

“. . . Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counselors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the function of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believer’s capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá’í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message to the Bahá’ís of the world, 1996.

FACT Data on Conflict in Religious Communities

Data gathered as part of an interfaith survey in 2000 showed that all religious communities experience conflict. The data from FACT (Faith Communities Today) showed that 75% of congregations reported some level of conflict in the last five years.

The data also revealed what types of conflict are most common in the Bahá’í community nationwide. In answer to the

The Call to a New State of Mind, continued

question “During the last five years has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts in the following areas?” over 700 Spiritual Assemblies responded as follows:

**Survey results
on conflict in
Bahá'í
communities**

	Bahá'í communities reporting any conflict	Bahá'í communities reporting moderate or severe conflict
Individual behavior	49%	38%
LSA decisions	35%	23%
Application of teachings	35%	22%
Proclamation or teaching campaign	28%	12%
Money/finances/budget	24%	11%
How worship (Feast) is conducted	23%	8%
Ethnic or racial tensions	19%	11%

When looking at strong conflict in the community, it appears that all of the above issues created conflict in a relatively small percentage of the population with the exception of the “Behavior/lifestyle of an individual Bahá'í,” which was a cause of some conflict in half of all communities and caused moderate to severe conflict in almost 40%.

The Dynamics of Conflict

“If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 56.

“... dissension - even with the Devil - is the way to bitter loss. This is why, in our illumined age, God teacheth that conflicts and disputes are not allowable, not even with Satan himself.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 275.

* * * * *

Four types of changes that occur in all parties to a conflict

Social science research has uncovered a pattern of four types of changes that occur in a progressive and predictable order in all parties to a conflict, often unbeknownst to them. This summary is used with permission of Management Associates.

1. Emotions engage:

- ★ Anger and defensiveness are common
- ★ Sense of personal worth, dignity, and/or physical safety are threatened
- ★ Stress and anxiety increase
- ★ Problems take on emotional significance
- ★ Suspicion and hostility increase
- ★ Tolerance for ambiguity decreases

2. Perceptions distort:

- ★ Tendency to see the situation as black and white increases
- ★ Moral self-imaging and seeing the other as “enemy” occur
- ★ Selective inattention takes place: we hear only positive about ourselves and only negative about others
- ★ Sensitivity to differences increases and awareness of similarities decreases
- ★ Areas of common agreement are overlooked
- ★ Tendency to perceive threat or conspiracies increases
- ★ People, not issues, are seen as the problem

The Dynamics of Conflict, continued

Four types of changes that occur in all parties to a conflict, continued

3. Thinking alters:

- ★ Memory becomes selective
- ★ Evaluation skills deteriorate:
 - Overvalue own and undervalue other's ideas, thoughts and positions
 - Become unjustifiably confident of own understanding of other's position
- ★ Tendency to simplify and generalize increases: stereotyping and labeling
- ★ Focus of thinking shifts:
 - Goal shifts from solving the problem to winning
 - Planning shifts from problem solving to strategies for winning
 - Issues expand in scope from specific to general
 - Communication shifts from exploring or explaining to justifying
 - Range of possible/acceptable solutions is reduced

4. Behavior changes:

- ★ Cliques and support groups form
- ★ Behavior becomes guarded, and information and feelings are suppressed
- ★ Communication patterns alter:
 - Frequency is reduced or stopped
 - Intent becomes to mislead or deceive
 - "Loaded" words are used
 - Verbal attacks occur, directly or as backbiting
 - Demands escalate
 - Inflexibility and hardening of positions occur
 - Power, threats, coercion, punishment and bluffing are used in attempts to influence
 - Readiness to exploit other's needs and deny other's requests increases

Six Stages of the Conflict Cycle

1. Latent

The basic conditions for potential conflict exist but have not yet been recognized. This stage is similar to “an accident waiting to happen.”

2. Perceived

The cause of the conflict is recognized by one or more of the participants.

3. Felt

Emotions are engaged and tension begins to build between the participants, although no open struggle has yet begun.

4. Manifest

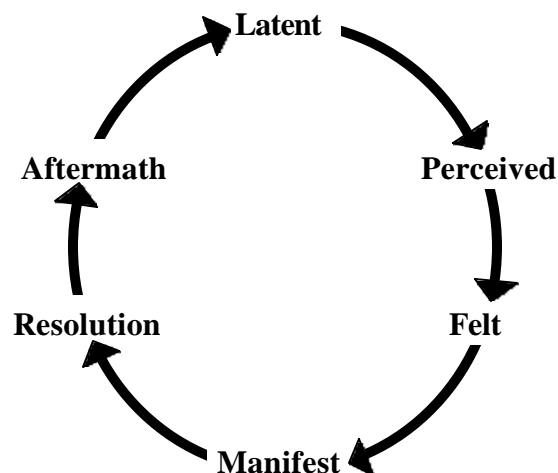
A struggle is underway, and the behavior of the participants makes the existence of the conflict apparent to others who are not directly involved.

5. Resolution

The struggle is resolved in one of several possible ways, either constructive or destructive in nature.

6. Aftermath

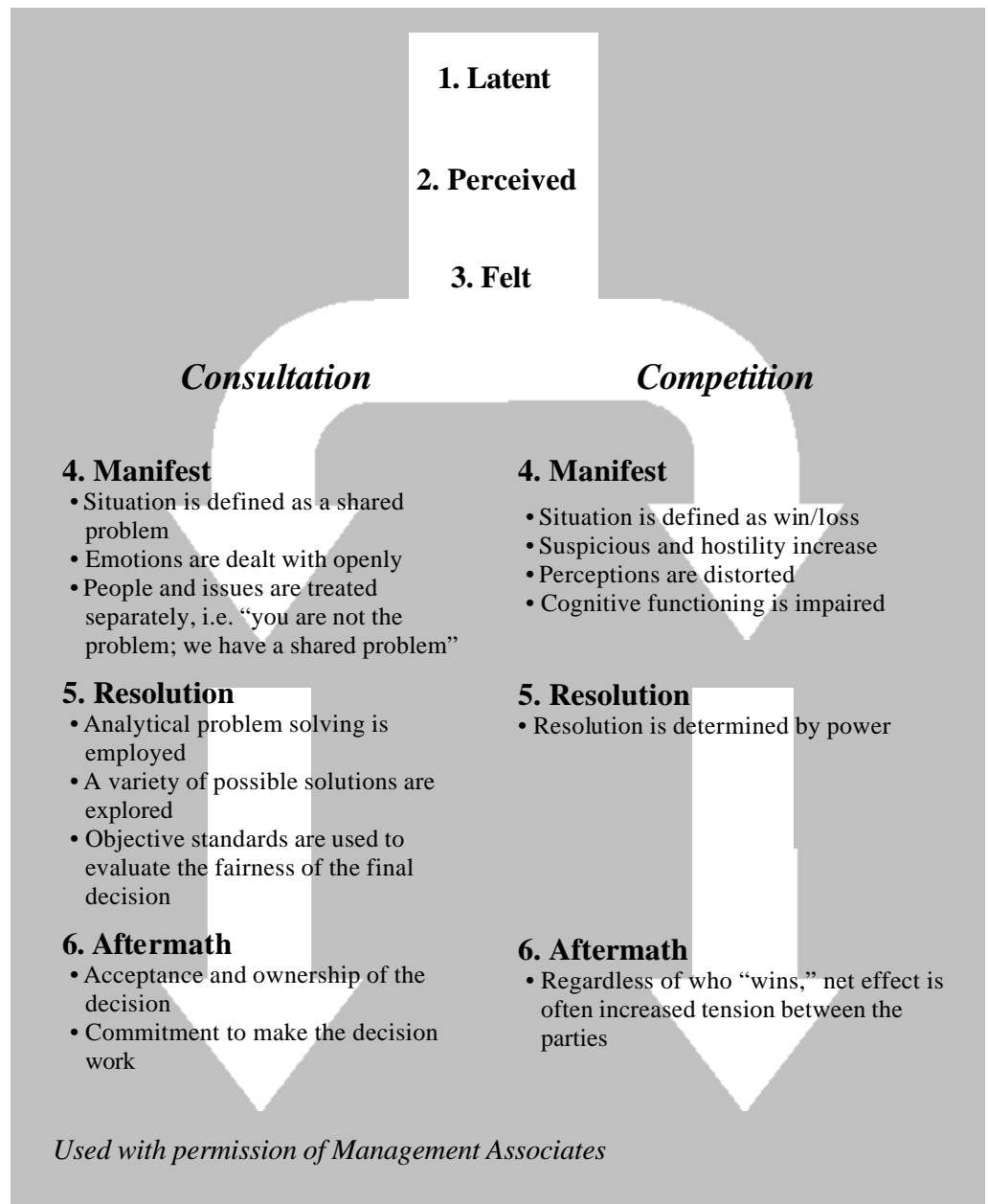
Residual effects of the conflict and the manner of its resolution linger and influence behavior and attitudes. Conditions are established that will lead either to more effective collaboration in the future or to a new conflict that may be more severe than the last.



The Conflict Choice Point and Its Consequences

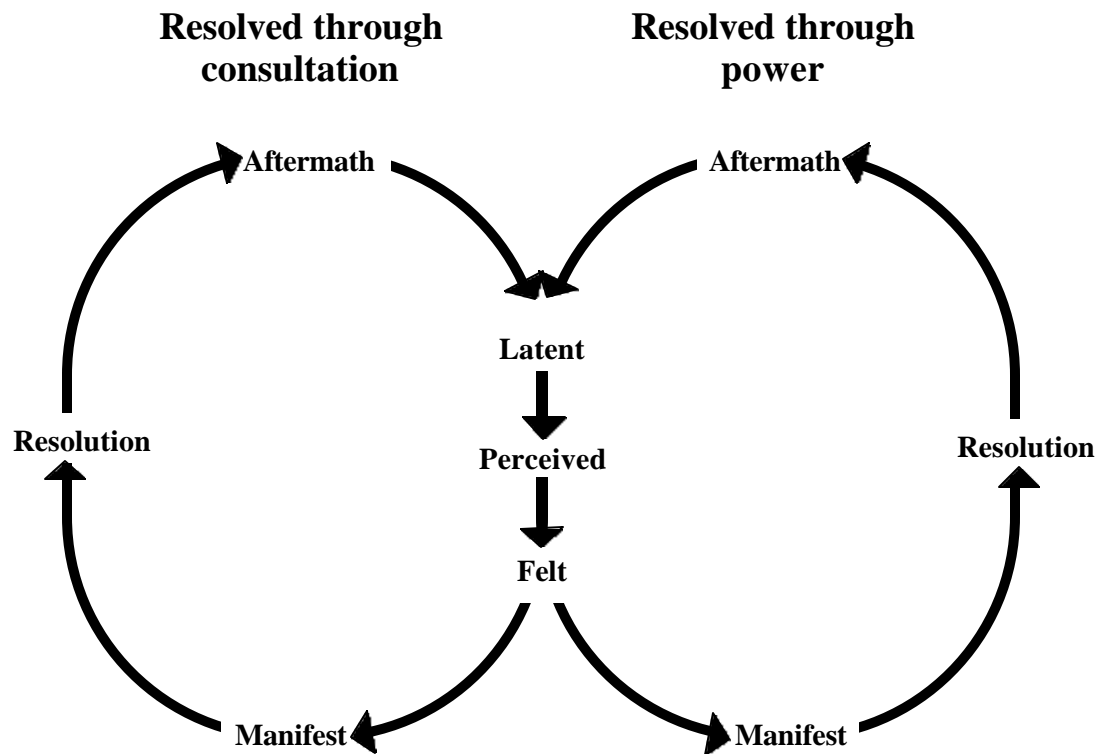
By the third stage in the conflict cycle conditions leading to the conflict have been recognized and emotional tension has begun to build. At this critical point each participant in the conflict has the choice of approaching the situation as an opportunity for consultation or for the type of competition that springs from the desire to “subvert one another in an endless quest for supremacy and dominion,” to use the language of the Universal House of Justice in its statement “The Promise of World Peace.”

The choice made at this point will set in motion dynamics that will influence the final three stages of the cycle.



The Conflict Choice Point and Its Consequences, continued

Whether the conflict is resolved consultatively or through power, its aftermath establishes a new set of latent conditions which influence the future of the relationship.



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Maturation, Conflict, and Development in the Bahá'í Community

Compile a list of elements and dynamics that can contribute to a realistic set of expectations about the developmental process of building unified Bahá'í communities

“The Bahá'í community is an association of individuals who have voluntarily come together, on recognizing Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behavior and to build the institutions that are to promote these patterns.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 2, 1996, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 55.

“. . . Bahá'ís recognize that individuals do not become wholly virtuous on accepting the Faith. It takes time for them to grow spiritually out of their personal imperfections and out of the structural and behavioral assumptions of the societies in which they have been raised, which color their view of the world. . . . Bahá'í Administration has provisions to cope with such human frailties and is designed to enable the believers to build Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order in the midst of their imperfections, but without conflicts which would destroy the entire edifice.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 2, 1996, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, pp. 51, 52.

“Often these trials and tests which all Bahá'í communities inevitably pass through seem terrible, at the moment, but in retrospect we understand that they were due to the frailty of human nature, to misunderstandings, and to the growing pains which every Bahá'í community must experience.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 25, 1956, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 602, #2038.

“In the life of any Community, especially an immature Community such as that of the Bahá'ís at present – still in its infancy, so to speak – there are bound to be all kinds of things arise which are disturbing to some of the friends and a test to them. The main thing is that they should never allow such things to disturb that fundamental sense of unity and spiritual kinship which should underlie all Bahá'í Community life. We must realize our imperfection and not permit ourselves to get too upset over the unfortunate things which occur, sometimes in Conventions, sometimes in Assemblies or on Committees, etc. Such things are essentially superficial and in time will be outgrown.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 17, 1943, in *Behold Me*, p. 92, #205.

Maturation, Conflict, and Development in the Bahá'í Community, continued

“So many misunderstandings arise from the passionate attachment of the friends to the Faith and also their immaturity. We must therefore be very patient and loving with each other and try to establish unity in the Bahá'í family.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 17, 1944, in *The Compilation of Compilations, vol. II*, p. 13, #1301.

“As the community strives to build up a new pattern of life, based on the inculcation of new attitudes, habits and principles, it is inevitable that the friends will experience tests of all kinds. It is not, after all, an easy process that we are engaged in. We must, however, be confident in our Lord, Who is ever watchful and vigilant, especially in relation to the Cause He so jealously guards, and never become discouraged. If there has been injustice or if certain individuals have acted with malign intent, rest assured that, with the passage of time and through the operation of God's grace, all that has been hidden will ultimately be revealed. This is Bahá'u'lláh's assurance to His faithful followers.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, October 27, 1997, to an individual.

The Role of the Assembly

“The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers.”

“The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers. And this they can adequately achieve provided they are motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with firm determination to act with justice in all cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , March 9, 1934, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 33, #119.

“ . . . when Bahá’ís permit the dark forces of the world to enter into their own relationships within the Faith they gravely jeopardise its progress; it is the paramount duty of the believers, the local assemblies, and particularly the N.S.A. to foster harmony, understanding and love amongst the friends.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , May 13, 1945, in *The Compilation of Compilations vol. II*, p. 14, #1306.

“Unity of mankind is the pivotal principle of His Revelation; Bahá’í communities must therefore become renowned for their demonstration of this unity. In a world becoming daily more divided by factionalism and group interests, the Bahá’í community must be distinguished by the concord and harmony of its relationships. The coming of age of the human race must be foreshadowed by the mature, responsible understanding of human problems and the wise administration of their affairs by these same Bahá’í communities. The practice and development of such Bahá’í characteristics are the responsibility alike of individual Bahá’ís and administrative institutions, although the greatest opportunity to foster their growth rests with the Local Spiritual Assemblies.”

The Universal House of Justice, Naw-Rúz message to the Bahá’ís of the world, 1974, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986*, p. 264.

“Although Local Spiritual Assemblies are primarily responsible for counseling believers regarding personal problems, there may be times, when in the judgment of the National or Local Assembly, it would be preferable to assign counseling or advisory duties to individuals or committees. This is within the discretion of the Assembly.”

The Universal House of Justice, March 27, 1966, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 21, #45.

The Role of the Assembly, continued

“... the Assembly is not always required to assume the role of adjudicator.”

“While it is always to be hoped that Bahá’ís will find ways of settling disputes without resort to the civil courts, and while it may be desirable that the parties consult their Assembly, the Assembly is not always required to assume the role of adjudicator.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, March 29, 1979, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* (1998 edition), 19.5.

“In general . . . a Bahá’í couple . . . who are obtaining a divorce must, in addition to the Bahá’í divorce, obtain a civil divorce, and the civil divorce decree will usually cover all such matters as division of property, provision of support and custody of children. The function of the Spiritual Assembly in such ancillary aspects of the divorce is thus advisory rather than judiciary. In order to prevent, if possible, dispute between Bahá’ís in front of the law courts, the Assembly should attempt to bring the couple to an amicable arrangement about all such questions, which can then be submitted to the court for its endorsement. If the efforts of the Assembly are of no avail, then the matter must be left to the civil court to decide.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 13, 1983, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* (1998 edition), 17.18.

“The proper functioning of these institutions depends largely on the efforts of their members to familiarize themselves with their duties and to adhere scrupulously to principle in their personal behavior and in the conduct of their official responsibilities.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the world, 1993.

“Unity within the Assembly itself is, of course, of immediate importance to the wider unity your actions are intended to foster and sustain. At no time can any member of your Assembly afford to be unmindful of this basic requirement nor neglect to work towards upholding it.”

The Universal House of Justice, May 19, 1994, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 37.

“The honoured members of the Spiritual Assembly should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing

The Role of the Assembly, continued

conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 9, #19.

“Personal animosities, suspicions, accusations, wounded pride, controversial issues must all be laid aside. Members of assemblies, national and local, must be the first to set a worthy example to their fellow-believers.”

Shoghi Effendi, in *The Light of Divine Guidance*, Vol. 1, p. 155.

“The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 20, 1941, in *The Compilation of Compilations vol. II*, p. 52, #1387.

Acting as a Third Party

An Assembly can assist in the resolution of conflicts by performing the following third party functions

1. Fostering mutual motivation for problem-solving and conflict-resolution:

- ★ Assessing the flexibility and desire of all parties to reach agreement
- ★ Structuring realistic expectations
- ★ Increasing motivation through reference to appeals in the Writings

2. Improving openness and accuracy of communication:

- ★ Setting norms for how to air differences by holding all parties to the high standards of Bahá'í consultation
- ★ Summarizing each party's perceptions
- ★ Restating messages until all parties agree on the meaning
- ★ Reintroducing points that seem to be ignored or dismissed
- ★ Validating perceptions and expectations
- ★ Providing emotional support and reassurance

3. Diagnosing the issues and processes of the conflict:

- ★ Clarifying the issues
- ★ Separating the issues from the people
- ★ Suggesting topics for discussion
- ★ Pointing out areas of similarity
- ★ Suggesting topics for individual reflection

4. Regulating the interaction among the participants:

- ★ Creating a safe environment
- ★ Monitoring the tension level
- ★ Balancing power by treating all parties with equal love and respect

Counseling Believers in Conflict

Select points or themes to be raised directly with believers, either in personal consultation with the Assembly or in letters sent to them

“. . . the Guardian feels the best course of action in this matter is to ask both of the believers concerned to forgive and forget the entire matter.

“He does not want the friends to form the habit of taking up a kind of Bahá’í litigation against each other. Their duties to humanity are too sacred and urgent in these days, when the Cause is struggling to spread and assert its independence, for them to spend their precious time, and his precious time, in this way. Ask them, therefore, to unite, forget the past, and serve as never before.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , July 22, 1947, *The Compilation of Compilations vol. II*, p. 9, #1287.

“When criticism and harsh words arise within a Bahá’í community, there is no remedy except to put the past behind one, and persuade all concerned to turn over a new leaf, and for the sake of God and His Faith refrain from mentioning the subjects which have led to misunderstanding and inharmony. The more the friends argue back and forth and maintain, each side, that their point of view is the right one, the worse the whole situation becomes.

“When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow-Bahá’ís to take this point of view, and to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , February 16, 1951, in *The Compilation of Compilations vol. II*, p.23, #1330.

“Briefly, some are mere children; with the utmost love we must educate them to make them wise. Others are sick and ailing; we must tenderly treat them until they recover. Some have unworthy morals; we must train them toward the standard of true morality.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 66.

“What the believers need is . . . to have more peace-makers circulating among them. Unfortunately, not only average people, but average Bahá’ís, are very immature; gossip, trouble-making,

Counseling Believers in Conflict, continued

criticism, seem easier than the putting into practice of love, constructive words and cooperation. It is one of the functions of the older and the more mature Bahá'ís to help the weaker ones to iron out their difficulties and learn to really function and live like true believers!”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , January 11, 1950, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 90.

“. . . he feels very strongly that if . . . is in the state your letter would seem to indicate it is certainly conducting its affairs in the wrong way. . . . For where is Bahá'í love? Where is putting unity and harmony first? Where is the willingness to sacrifice one's personal feelings and opinions to achieve love and harmony? What makes the Bahá'ís think that when they sacrifice the spiritual laws the administrative laws are going to work?

“. . . He urges you to exert your utmost to get the . . . Bahá'ís to put aside such obnoxious terms as ‘radical’, ‘conservative’, ‘progressive’, ‘enemies of the Cause’, ‘squelching the teachings’, etc. If they paused for one moment to think for what purpose the Báb and the Martyrs gave their lives, and Bahá'u'lláh and the Master accepted so much suffering, they would never let such definitions and accusations cross their lips when speaking of each other. As long as the friends quarrel amongst themselves their efforts will not be blessed for they are disobeying God.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi , February 24, 1950, in *The Compilation of Compilations vol. II*, p.21, #1325.

“The problems of society which affect our community and those problems which naturally arise from within the community itself, whether social, spiritual, economic or administrative, will be solved as our numbers and resources multiply, and as at all levels of the community the friends develop the ability, willingness, courage and determination to obey the laws, apply the principles and administer the affairs of the Faith in accordance with divine precepts.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message to the Bahá'ís of the world, 1993.

Dealing with Disruptive Individuals

“One area in which liberty is limited in the Bahá’í community is that governing methods and channels for the expression of criticism.”

“The operating principles of the new Order to which we have been called are only partially understood, since the transition from the old one is far from complete. . . . The temptation when we falter in applying them and become disappointed or frustrated may well be to lapse into the methods of the society around us. Disappointment and frustration give rise to criticism. This is natural. The expression of criticism is essential to the progress of the Bahá’í community. But to be effective, it must adhere to the discipline of Bahá’í consultation; otherwise the consequence will be to increase rather than decrease the difficulties of the community and to impede its progress. The critical attitude now prevalent abroad, with all the cynicism and contentiousness it evokes, is for the most part unacceptable to Bahá’í practice.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, February 28, 1997, to an individual.

“In terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá’í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of humankind.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 17.

“The point at issue has thus become that of whether believers should be permitted to continue indefinitely to undermine the faith of their fellow Bahá’ís, stir up agitation within the community, and publicly assail the theory as well as the practice of Bahá’u’lláh’s Administrative Order.

“In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá’u’lláh states: ‘We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others.’ One area in which liberty is limited in the Bahá’í community is that governing methods and channels for the expression of criticism.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 2, 1996, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 53.

“Clearly, then, there is more to be considered than the critic’s right to self-expression; the unifying spirit of the Cause of God must also be preserved, the authority of its laws and ordinances safeguarded. . . . Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one’s fellows, love for one’s community, love for one’s institutions.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 16.

“When a believer has emotional or psychological problems which render him incapable of behaving responsibly, the Local Spiritual Assembly must, to safeguard the welfare of the community, consider what it can do to minimize the person’s influence.”

“It is important to note, however, that individuals who wish to present their views should do so in a way compatible with the Bahá’í spirit of consultation. It sometimes happens that a believer insists on expounding his view at Bahá’í meetings, and frequently disrupts such gatherings, and may even display such behaviour in the presence of non-Bahá’ís. If he stubbornly persists in this conduct, despite exhortations and warnings given to him by the proper Bahá’í institutions, he will somehow have to be prevented from taking the law into his own hands and jeopardizing Bahá’í interests. When differences such as these arise, it is important that frank and loving consultation between the person concerned and the Local Spiritual Assembly, and if need be the National Spiritual Assembly, should take place, or perhaps the institutions of the Counsellors could help resolve the problem.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, August 3, 1982, in *Issues Concerning Community Functioning*, section 1.2.3, p. 8.

“Limited sanctions (i.e. restrictions on one’s eligibility to serve on institutions or participate in community events) are usually imposed in cases where the individual disrupts the unity of the community, or is mentally unfit and unable to exercise judgment or behave responsibly. The Universal House of Justice has clearly indicated that a National Spiritual Assembly may debar an individual from serving on a Local Spiritual Assembly without removing his administrative rights.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 31, 1972, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* (1998 edition), 15.29.

“As larger numbers of people become Bahá’ís, the institutions as well as individual believers will have to learn to accommodate and to assist those persons who, while perhaps not mentally ill by medical definition, nonetheless have negative, unpleasant or disruptive personalities. When a believer has emotional or psychological problems which render him incapable of behaving responsibly, the Local Spiritual Assembly must, to safeguard the welfare of the community, consider what it can do to minimize the person’s influence. On the one hand it must help such persons and give them loving attention, and on the other it must remain alert to shelter the Cause which may ultimately be the person’s only source of consolation and assistance.”

Summary from *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* (1998 edition), 15.29.

Applying Spiritual and Administrative Principles: Reviewing the Process

The process of identifying and applying principles to the problems and responsibilities of the Local Assembly requires careful research and reasoning. Any decision made by an Assembly should be grounded in the guidance of the Writings and the senior institutions. The following steps are components of the process:

1. Gather the facts from all relevant sources:

This may require interviewing those involved with the situation. Facts may include emotions, such as the existence of antipathy or repentance. Organize the facts so that they can be presented with clarity. Make sure all Assembly members agree on the facts.

2. Identify and state the problem:

This step provides a common focal point and enables the next steps to be done more efficiently and with greater unity of purpose. This step is often harder than it sounds.

3. Identify and agree upon which principles are involved:

Often several principles are relevant to the problem. Some principles may be in tension with one another.

4. Apply the principles to the facts in a full, frank and loving discussion:

Principles exist in the abstract, outside of particular situations. The job of the Assembly is to apply the principles involved to the specific situation at hand. While the principles are themselves unchangeable, their application is flexible. The way a principle is applied may vary from case to case.

5. Make a decision based on the principles:

“. . . the primary challenge in dealing with issues . . . is to raise the context to the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism. . . .

“There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. . . . all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them.”

The Universal House of Justice, “The Promise of World Peace,” in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, pp. 689-90.

Case Studies for Consultation*

Case #1

Lucia has been teaching her friends about the Bahá'í Faith, strongly emphasizing the principles of love and harmony. At the last four Feasts she attended, she saw the consultative portion degenerate into fault-finding and outright arguing. Frustrated by this obvious disharmony, Lucia wrote to the Spiritual Assembly and asked that she be dropped from the membership roll.

Question: How might the Assembly respond to Lucia and keep her active in the Faith?

Case #2

Jim and Farhad decided to go into business together. Few of their business assumptions and expectations were formalized in writing or in legal contracts. Despite hard work and careful planning, the enterprise has not prospered and now seems likely to fail entirely. As the business has faltered, the relationship between the two has become increasingly strained. While both men are struggling not to backbite, each clearly feels disillusioned and let down by his partner and fellow Bahá'í. The tension between them is visible at community events, and the friends are beginning to rally in support of either Jim or Farhad.

Question: What role could the Assembly play in helping Jim and Farhad during this difficult time and in keeping their conflict from escalating or dividing the community?

Case #3

Tim is a bright, strongly-spoken individual who has several issues that he cares about passionately. He is frustrated that these issues do not receive the attention he feels they deserve, either from the Assembly or the community at large. Every event he attends becomes a venue for “shaking people up to their responsibilities,” as he puts it. Several believers have stopped bringing their friends to the weekly teaching activity, and one family has decided not to come to Feasts any more because their children are afraid of Tim. Tim received treatment for emotional instability several years ago, but he feels he is no longer in need of either therapy or medication.

Question: What approaches could the Assembly take to improve this situation?

Case Studies for Consultation*, continued

Case #4

Lori and Mike completed a year of patience and were divorced 8 months ago. Both still live in the same, relatively small community. Lori has primary care and custody of their two young children. The divorce was a bitter one, and the bitterness has not dissipated. Lori feels that Mike has undeservedly come out of the situation looking like “the good guy.” Mike resents being reduced to “a weekend Dad.” The children are clearly uncomfortable with the continuing tension between their parents. Since Lori and Mike dislike being present at the same event, the community has become drawn into choosing whom to invite to what activities. Feasts and holy days are awkward for everyone.

Question: What steps could the Assembly take to improve this situation?

*** Note:** The case studies in Assembly Development Workshops are designed to facilitate instruction and consultation on the principles of Baha'i Administration as they apply to hypothetical situations. The case studies contain elements that may well be reflected in the fact patterns of actual cases, but no case study is meant to represent any real case. All names used in the case studies are fictional and are not intended to refer to any person or persons in any real case.

Assurances of Divine Confirmations

**“Bahá’í
Administration
has provisions to
cope with such
human
frailties . . .”**

“The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers. And this they can adequately achieve provided they are motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with firm determination to act with justice in all cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 9, 1934, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 23.

“Inspired by the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings, we are called on to make the Bahá’í community a haven of harmony and love, in contrast to the distress, contention and strife of the surrounding society.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, April 13, 1994, to an individual.

“Bahá’í Administration has provisions to cope with such human frailties and is designed to enable the believers to build Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order in the midst of their imperfections, but without conflicts which would destroy the entire edifice.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 2, 1996, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 52.

“His constant hope is that the believers will conduct themselves, individually and in their Bahá’í Community life, in such a manner as to attract the attention of others to the Cause. The world is not only starving for lofty principles and ideals, it is, above all, starving for a shining example which the Bahá’ís can and must provide.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 22, 1945, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 432, #1413.

Supplemental Readings

Useful perspectives for Assemblies counseling believers in conflict

The following articles will provide useful perspectives for Assemblies counseling believers in conflict, particularly conflicts related to business matters, and will also be valuable for deepening the friends about points to consider when engaging in business relations within the Bahá'í community.

Reflections on Practicality and Business Dealings, comments of Hand of the Cause of God Ruhiyyih Khánum (Participant Handouts p. 25)

Doing Business Together: Guidelines for a Harmonious Business Relationship, by Lawrence M. Miller (Participant Handouts pp. 26-33)

Ruhiyyih Khánum's Reflections on Practicality and Business Dealings

“ . . . if you plan to go into business with someone . . . investigate them as to reliability and competence, honesty and capacity to really do what they claim they can and will do; and, above all, do it in a legal way.”

“One of the great arts of living, one we all strive to attain, is to be able to strike the happy medium between idealism and realism, between using good judgment personally and still, ultimately, placing all our affairs in the hands of God and letting Him guide us. Too often we consider that to be spiritual is to not be practical! Yet what could ever be more intensely practical than the Teachings Bahá'u'lláh gave us? Do we ever stop to think that when he was alive He was the most practical, efficient and competent person in the whole world? We are so overpowered by His spiritual station that we forget the many ways this manifested itself.

“All my life I have been the witness of acts of extreme impracticality committed by Bahá'ís in the name of spirituality. Let me give some examples of the kind of acts I am referring to: normally people associate keeping in good health with certain sensible principles, but when they get carried away by their enthusiasm and 'spirituality', they ignore all these and often fall ill needlessly; normally they would ponder certain economic realities before embarking on a project like opening a school, starting a business, entering into a partnership, or making some substantial investment, but in the name of 'Bahá'u'lláh will look after me' they leap in without proper investigation and forethought, often suffer humiliation and bankruptcy, involve others in hardship and disgrace, and then are hurt and shaken to the core because they feel that God deserted them in their hour of need! No wonder Shoghi Effendi constantly advised the friends that in technical matters they should seek the advice of experts. I could write a good-sized book about the cases when they did not and they and the Cause were the losers. All this adds up to: if you are ill get a good doctor; if you want to invest money consult a reliable banker or business adviser; if you plan to go into business with someone (a Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í) investigate them as to reliability and competence, honesty and capacity to really do what they claim they can and will do; and, above all, do it in a legal way. Have a legal contract stating your relationship, affairs, and responsibilities. When something is in writing, properly signed and according to law, many future misunderstandings and consequent inharmony can be avoided, and all those remarks such as, 'But you promised', 'I thought you meant', 'You were the one who are supposed to do that, not I. . .', which are so often said when some understanding falls apart, need never be said.”

Ruhiyyih Rabbani, *A Manual for Pioneers*, pp. 10-11.

Doing Business Together: Guidelines for a Harmonious Business Relationship

by **Lawrence M. Miller**

As Bahá'ís we desire to devote our entire lives to our Faith and the creation of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. Unfortunately, we must live in the world of today and that, for most of us, means working eight hours a day, five days a week (at least). Many Bahá'ís have felt that if they could work side-by-side with fellow Bahá'ís their working lives would be more rewarding. Many have endeavored to do this by hiring Bahá'ís or by forming businesses with their fellow Bahá'ís. While the motives of these ventures are almost always worthy, many of these ventures have turned sour, not only failing to achieve the hoped for rewards, but resulting in personal conflicts, disharmony in the community and, in some cases, financial loss.

I would like to offer some guidelines for Bahá'ís considering joint business ventures that I hope may increase the number of successful ventures and help reduce the number of disappointing experiences. No guidelines are a substitute for sound judgment, consultation with the Institutions of the Faith as well as following principles of ethics and sound business.

When entering into a business, many Bahá'ís have felt that their Faith offers principles that are superior to the common principles of business. They have therefore proceeded to ignore common and accepted business practices feeling that they would be guided by the principles of the Faith. This is a mistake. If one is to be successful in business, one must understand and follow sound and commonly accepted business practices. The overwhelming majority of these practices are consistent with Bahá'í teachings and are necessary. Only the Bahá'í who first understands these practices and is experienced in business can then begin to apply Bahá'í principles to refine and improve business practices. This same principle is true in the fields of science, education, the arts, etc.

1. On Hiring Bahá'ís

Hiring someone is quite a different matter than entering into a joint business venture. If you are hiring someone, you are already in the business; and you have a position of responsibility to the organization. If you have the authority to hire, you have been given the responsibility and are trusted to find the best possible person to fill a position. Ethically, you must work to fill the position with the most competent, dedicated, and trustworthy

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person available. If this person is also of the Bahá'í Faith, that is well and good. However, the fact that someone is a Bahá'í does not assure that he or she is the most competent, dedicated or trustworthy person for this job.

Our civil law prohibits discrimination according to race or religion. This is a protection for people of all faiths. It is also a protection to the business, the managers, owners, and customers of a business from the practice of hiring people because of a distinction that is not relevant to the performance of the business. When hiring, your obligation to your customers and business owners takes priority over your desire to hire a Bahá'í. Doing otherwise is likely to result in damage to the reputation of the Faith.

2. Investing in Another's Venture

When one has funds available above and beyond one's daily living requirements (including regular contributions to the Bahá'í funds), it is wise to invest those funds so that they are working to produce additional wealth. Many Bahá'ís have been presented with investment opportunities by fellow Bahá'ís and welcomed the opportunity to put the money to use to aid a fellow Bahá'í and work with someone whom they have felt they could trust. As in other joint business dealings, sound business practices should be followed when investing, regardless of the Faith or familiarity of the person with whom you are dealing. The following are some principles that may help you consider investment opportunities:

A. Do Not Take Risks You Can't Afford

Do not invest funds that you require for living expenses. The only investments available today that involve no risk are those that are insured by the federal government. These investments are government bonds, savings accounts, or other deposits in banks and savings and loan institutions. Because they involve little or no risk, they also produce a low return on the money invested. The very concept of investment is one of a return for taking a risk. The greater the risk, the greater the possible return (or loss); the lower the risk, the lower the possible return. If there are funds that you must have for your daily living, it is irresponsible to be taking risks with those funds. Never borrow against the equity in your home to use the borrowed funds for a risky (although possibly high return) venture.

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B. Evaluate Risks Realistically

Bahá'ís are very often optimists. This optimism sometimes causes us to overstate the likelihood of a return and to understate the risks involved in a venture. We don't like to be negative, therefore, we don't like to talk about the possibility of loss. It is very important that when you invest, you have a very realistic understanding of the potential of losing your money, as well as the potential of gaining a profit. Always ask about the risks of loss. Ask for information about similar investments managed by the same person with whom you are now considering investing. Ask for references. Remember that there is a general, yet lawful relationship between the potential for high return and the potential to lose your money. In other words, you are very unlikely to lose your money investing in a fund that has consistently produced a 10% return. Investing in a real estate venture, new invention, or start up business that may produce several hundred percent return on your investment is likely to be very risky; and there is a very high possibility that you will lose your money. Such investments are generally wise investments only for those persons who can afford to lose the money that they will invest and still be able to cover their current living and retirement needs. You should very seriously question any investment that claims a very high return, yet very low risk. It is such claims that usually are intended for the naive investor and are often presented by either incompetent or dishonest individuals.

C. Make Your Agreement In Writing

Anytime you give someone your money for investment purposes or for a loan, you should receive a signed document in exchange. This document should, at a minimum, acknowledge the receipt of the funds, the purpose for which those funds will be used, the terms and conditions under which those funds will be returned, and any guarantee or security for their return. This document should be signed by both parties and witnessed by an impartial third party.

I strongly recommend that you make use of the services of an attorney for the writing of such documents if the investment is of a significant nature. Significant or not, you should have a signed document.

Many Bahá'ís have a mistaken attitude toward signed documents. Bahá'ís often feel that if they ask for a signed

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document it is an indication of distrust in the other person and, therefore, insulting. Two parties who do not trust each other should not enter into any business arrangement regardless of its nature, risks, or conditions. Our management consulting firm will not do business with anyone whom we do not trust, and we don't expect anyone to employ us if they do not trust us. However, we always have a signed agreement that specifies the objectives, methods, time, and fees for any work. This is a sound business practice that is a protection for both parties. If two people trust each other, there is no reason not to put the understanding in writing! The discipline of writing down the agreements and understanding will most often force the two parties to come to grips with the real issues, discuss those issues, and acknowledge the mutual understandings. Attorneys have been trained to identify the important issues in a business relationship and write understandings in a manner that will not be open to misinterpretation.

When considering an investment presented to you by another Bahá'í, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can I afford to lose the money I am investing? If not, your money should remain in a secure or guaranteed fund.
2. Does the stated potential risk logically match the potential for profit? If the potential for return is very high, yet the risks appear to be very low, you probably don't know enough about this investment. Inquire further.
3. Does the person who will manage the funds or investment have a proven track record of managing similar investments? What knowledge do you have of those investments?
4. Are all of the understandings regarding this investment in writing and agreed to by all parties?

3. Going into Business Together

When discussing investments previously, I was discussing passive investments, those in which you share ownership but in which you do not plan to be actively involved. In this section I will present some guidelines for participating actively in a business venture with another Bahá'í.

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Starting a new business venture is risky. The majority of all new businesses fail within the first couple of years. It is a good bet that your new business, your hope and your dreams, your baby and your investment, will fail! While this sounds negative, it is a fact; and you are most likely to succeed or be protected from failure if you are realistic about your chances. Hopefully, you will do those things that minimize the risks and maximize the probability of success. Here are some suggestions:

A. Who Will Contribute What?

Let us assume that we are starting a new business. Let us assume that our new business will be a retail store that will be in the business of importing and selling jewelry. Three Bahá'ís plan to enter into this business together. Tom has inherited a large sum of money, and he will provide the capital funds required to start the business. Paula has sold jewelry before, is currently unemployed, and will manage the store. Armand has friends in foreign countries who can purchase excellent jewelry at a good price and he has been an artist himself, so he will purchase the jewelry. These are our three partners in our new business New Era Jewelry.

It would appear that they have a reasonable blend of capital, expertise, and time. These are the three elements most needed by a business and are the most common forms of contribution required. The first question that might be asked is who will own the business? Will this be an equal three-way partnership? Or, should Tom, because he has contributed all of the capital fund, hold all of the stock, while the other two parties act as employees? There is no right answer here. What is important is that all parties openly discuss the value of what they are going to contribute to the business and the control and compensation that they expect in return. Let us assume for our example that the parties agree that Tom will own 60% of the stock in the company, Paula will own 20%, and Armand will own 20%. They also agree that Paula will be paid a full time salary because she will work full time, Armand will be paid on a consulting basis for the time he will put in, and Tom will be paid no compensation. Profit, it is agreed, will be distributed according to the ownership shares.

Regarding Control: It should always be understood that control can legally be exerted by the person or persons who own

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51% of the shares of a business. It is amazing how many people enter into business and fail to understand the importance of this. This may appear insignificant during the dreamy days of the formation of a business. It is always very significant when the business is either succeeding or failing and it always does one of the two! Discuss the implications of stock ownership both in terms of exercising control and distributing profits. Be certain that these matters have been fully discussed and that all parties have the same understanding before the business is begun. Remember that decisions cannot be avoided; they must be made. Who will make what decisions?

Regarding Compensation: An agreement regarding compensation should be reached at the formation of a business. In our example it may be reasonable for Tom to accept no salary because he does not plan to spend any time running the business. He does plan, however, to receive profits for his shares of stock. It is certainly reasonable for Paula to receive a salary because she is going to be working full time in the business. However, Armand is going to maintain his regular job and manage the purchasing on weekends and evenings. When paying for expertise, rather than time, the amount and form of compensation is not nearly so obvious. However, it is often expertise that enables a business to succeed. What shall be fair compensation for this expertise? Again, there is not one right answer. The point is to reach prior agreement on this matter.

Many partnerships fail because the parties have failed to specify and agree on who will make what contribution and the fair and reasonable compensation and control that will result from each contribution. Before the business is begun, reach these agreements after full and frank discussion and put those agreements in writing.

What are your goals? How are you going to reach those goals? When are you going to reach them? What check points are there along the way?

Every good business person understands the importance of a clear and agreed upon plan. Logical, consistent, and enthusiastic action is motivated by a plan that all parties can understand. We like to see plans laid out before us. We like to see plans unfold. We

B. Develop a
Realistic,
Written Plan

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feel good when points on the plan are achieved. We feel bad when we miss checkpoints or goals. These dynamics are critical to the management of any business, or any activity of a group of people that is purposeful and produces results. This is why the Guardian of our Faith was always planning, measuring results, asking for goals, and praising success. This concept is central to business and management.

Invite all of the key members of your business to participate in the development of your plan. Use the principle of consultation here. This will result in a plan that all understand, to which they are committed, and which they feel is realistic and fair.

C. Plan for Failure

Successful business people have learned to anticipate events that may affect their business. Because failure is a common outcome of a new business venture, you should discuss how matters will be handled if the business fails. Will one party have any claims on the other parties? For example, if our jewelry store does not succeed, customers are inadequate, cash flow is negative, and the capital funds are rapidly being consumed, at what point will the partners agree to terminate the business? If Tom loses all of his capital, will he expect Paula or Armand to share in this loss? What if Tom decides to go out and borrow more money to put into the business? Will this change the ownership relationship? And, what will happen if two months into the business, Tom decides that this is not a wise decision, and he decides to terminate the business, take out his money, and sell the merchandise that has been purchased?

D. Communicate Openly

Open communication among key associates in a business is absolutely essential. Problems arise quickly when there is not open and frank consultation. A business partnership is much like a marriage. Conflicts and differing opinions are inevitable. The business, as the marriage, will succeed if the participants are determined to make it succeed by openly and honestly sharing their views, listening to one another, being willing to compromise and act in unity after a consultative decision is reached.

E. Recognize Cultural Differences

One of the strengths and appeals of the Bahá'í community is the diversity of its members. We come from a broad range of social, economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. These differences include different understandings about money, authority and

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management, the relative values of different contributions to a business, etc. It is much easier to go into a business partnership with someone who has all of the same understandings as yourself. If your partner comes from a different cultural background, he or she will have different views, some of which may be the basis for misunderstandings. For this reason it is even more important that all of the issues discussed above are consulted upon, agreed to, and planned for prior to entering into the business.

One additional suggestion: Many who are planning to go into business fail to deal with these issues up front because they are not entirely comfortable discussing potential sources of conflict. They are pushed under the rug, and the business is started on the prayer that these issues will not surface. They will surface! If you are not comfortable discussing any issue or possibility regarding a business venture with a potential partner, you should not go into partnership with this person. Either you, or the other person, lacks the maturity or other qualities necessary for a successful partnership. If you are uncomfortable discussing these issues before the beginning of business, you will have to discuss them later when they will not be anticipated problems, but real problems. This will be much more uncomfortable.

I believe that we Bahá'ís should be the most successful business persons. Our understanding of the trends in the world, our model of consultation, and our spirit of service are all assets that are very sought after qualities in a manager. Our spiritual understandings can enhance our ability to manage a business if we are willing to “walk the spiritual path with practical feet.” We must remember that in this new era there is no contradiction between the spiritual and the practical. If we pursue excellence in all of our affairs as the Master encouraged us, and if we are able to deal frankly and honestly with the important issues in our businesses, we will be examples for all in our professions.